

# The Real Causes of America's Wars, Lecture 3

## World War I

# World War I As Turning Point

- Last week, we discussed whether the Spanish-American War was a break with the traditional American foreign policy of non-intervention in European power politics.
- .

# Turning Point Continued

- There can be no doubt about WWI. There were about 116,000 American military deaths and 205,000 military wounded. This was far less than the European powers. E.g, France had about 1,400,000 military deaths and Germany 2,000,000

# America and Britain

- It's not true that after the war, it was inevitable that America would play an active role as a world power. There was a retreat in the 1920s and early 1930s.
- There is a mistake to avoid. Today, the US and Britain are always allied, so we might think that America was bound to come in on the British side. But this is reading history backwards.

# America and Britain Continued

- The US And Britain did not become close diplomatically until around 1900.
- There was almost a war between the US and Britain in 1895.

# Boundary Dispute

- There was a boundary dispute between Venezuela and British Guyana. America invoked the Monroe Doctrine and demanded that Britain submit the dispute to arbitration. The British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, told American Secretary of State Richard Olney that the Monroe Doctrine wasn't part of international law

# Better Relations

- War was averted, and after that relations between the two countries improved.
- In the Spanish-American War, the British government at first seemed to favor Spain. But the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, was very pro-American. The British press was also very pro-American

# Better Relations Continued

- Britain for much of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had followed a policy of “splendid isolation”, avoiding alliances.



# Better Relations III

- This changed with the Anglo-French Entente in 1904 and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. With the rising power of Germany, Britain saw the need for alliances. This led to better relations with America also.
- But this didn't imply that America would support Britain in a European war.

# Origins of War in 1914

- There were two rival alliance systems in Europe in 1914. The Triple Entente—Britain, France, and Russia. The Triple Alliance---Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. Italy didn't support her alliance powers.

# Origins Continued

- The immediate crisis began with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, June 28, 1914. There was evidence of complicity by officials in the Serbian government.

# Origins Continued II

- The Austrians received a guarantee of support from the Germans early in July. The Kaiser thought that the other European powers would be shocked by the assassination.

# More Origins

- Austria issued a 48-hour ultimatum to Serbia on July 23. The key demand was that Austria could conduct an investigation of the assassination in Serbia.
- Serbia gave an evasive answer to the ultimatum and Austria declared war.

# Germany and Russia

- Why did the local war between Austria and Serbia turn into a European war?
- Fritz Fischer, currently the most influential historian of the war's origins, claimed in 1961 that Germany wanted a European war. His view countered the revisionists of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Harry Elmer Barnes and Sidney B. Fay

# Germany and Russia

## Continued

- The revisionists pointed out that Russia was the first major power to mobilize. The Russians realized that Germany would consider this as making war inevitable.
- Russia did this primarily to try to gain control of the Straits of Constantinople.

# More Germany and Russia

- The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Sazanov, was especially important. According to Barnes, he and Alexander Izvolsky, the Russian Ambassador to Paris, wanted war to get the Straits. France under President Raymond Poincare wanted to recover Alsace-Lorraine, which had been lost in 1871.



# Britain and Belgium

- The British were committed to entering the war on France's side. This hadn't been disclosed to Parliament.
- Germany violated Belgian neutrality, because its war plan required a strike through Belgium at France.
- This gave the British government (Asquith and Grey) the excuse they needed to declare war.

# The British Role

- Britain intervened because of its commitments to France, not out shock at the violation of Belgium's neutrality. The British minister to Belgium, Lord Vivian, told the Belgian government in 1887 that Britain wouldn't intervene if Germany invaded Belgium to strike at France.
- The role of Britain and Germany as the most powerful members of the two alliance systems should be stressed.

# British Role Continued

- The British Ambassador to Russia, Sir George Buchanan, was sympathetic to Sazanov, although the Russians weren't completely honest about their intentions.

# Churchill

- The most ardent advocate for war in the British Cabinet was Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty,
- He mobilized the British fleet on July 28. This was a provocative gesture.

# America and the War

- The British had a longstanding aim of preventing any European power from dominating the continent. Remember the Napoleonic Wars. Also, Britain wanted to block Germany from rivaling it as a world power.
- There was no reason for the US to be interested in supporting these British goals. Theodore Roosevelt favored intervention because he thought that German control of the Atlantic would threaten us, but it isn't clear

# Woodrow Wilson

- Almost all Americans wanted to stay out of the war. Woodrow Wilson at first proclaimed American neutrality, calling for Americans to be neutral in “thought as well as deed”.
- Wilson was an ardent Anglophile. Although, according to most accounts, he at first did want to stay out of the war, he was by no means neutral.
- Wilson was a difficult person, who was sure of himself. Theodore Roosevelt said he had the personality of a “Byzantine logothete.”

# More Wilson

- Wilson believed that constitutional restraints on American government reflected an outdated, “mechanical” philosophy. A new organic philosophy was more in accord with the times. The government would lead the people as one body.
- In *Congressional Government* (1885), Wilson praised the British system of parliamentary supremacy, but he later favored executive control, i.e., control by himself.

# Colonel House

- Wilson's closest adviser was Edward Mandell House. He was usually called "Colonel" House, but he was just an honorary colonel. He was an even bigger Anglophile than Wilson.
- House wrote a novel, *Philip Dru Administrator*, about a progressive leader who conquers America and rules as a dictator.
- The American Ambassador to London, Walter Hines Page, was also pro-British. He worked



# The House of Morgan

- The most powerful banking interest in the US was the House of Morgan. The Morgan Bank was the fiscal agent of the Bank of England and also in charge of financing British and French war bonds in the US.

# Rothbard on the Morgans

- Rothbard makes clear that the Morgan interests aimed at much more than profits. To this very powerful group, the interests of Great Britain and her empire were paramount; and the Morgan bank constantly aimed to subordinate the interests of the United States to this superior power. After the onset of World War I, "the Morgans played a substantial role in bringing the United States into the war on Britain's side" .

# British Propaganda

- Because there were few Americans who wanted to get into the war, Britain realized the importance of a propaganda campaign.
- This campaign stressed German atrocities, especially in Belgium. Germany did follow a severe policy toward Belgian civilians who fought against them, but the lurid atrocity stories were largely made up. The great British historian and political scientist Lord Bryce was one of the leaders of the propaganda campaign.

# Propaganda Continued

- The success of British propaganda depended to a large degree on payments to newspapers, movies, and other outlets.
- Here the key figure was Samuel Insull. He was born in England but had become an American citizen. He controlled a large number of utility companies and was one of the

# America's Road to War

- The Morgan interests and British propaganda played major roles in America's going to war. But according to the best book on the subject, Charles Tansill, *America Goes to War* (1938), the decision to go to war was Wilson's. It wasn't inevitable.
- Tansill differed here from the conclusions of the Nye Committee in

# The Basic Issue

- The basic reason America got involved was violation of America's rights as a neutral power.
- Britain, in an effort to starve Germany, declared a blockade of the North Sea. Neutral ships that tried to bring in food to Germany would be subject to capture.

# The Basic Issue Continued

- This violated the generally accepted norms of international law. A legal blockade had to be “close”: it couldn’t be over a large area that the blockading power didn’t fully control. Also, it wasn’t legal to class food as contraband. Lord Salisbury had recognized this earlier. About 700,000 people died as a result of the starvation blockade

# The German Response

- In response to the British blockade, the Germans declared that it would launch submarine attacks against armed British merchant ships. This violated international law.
- Wilson sent notes saying that he would insist on strict accountability for violations of American rights. However, he didn't do much about British violations.



# The *Lusitania*

- The standard understanding of international law was that people who traveled on an armed merchant ship did so at their own risk.
- Wilson didn't accept this. His view was that American citizens on armed merchant ships were under US protection.
- The *RMS Lusitania* was armed with shells. It was sunk by a German submarine on May 6, 1915. About 1195 civilians were killed including 128 Americans.

# The *Lusitania* Continued

- Wilson sent a message to Germany calling on Germany to cease submarine warfare. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan resigned.
- After the sinking of the *Sussex*, a cross-Channel ferryboat that was mistaken for a minelayer, in March 1916 with loss of 25 American lives, Wilson denounced Germany in a speech to Congress in April 1916.
- Germany's promised to end submarine attacks on merchant ships.

# War

- Wilson campaigned in 1916 on the slogan, “he kept us out of war.”
- When Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917, Wilson decided on war. The publication of the Zimmerman telegram didn't help matters. This discussed a plan to restore Mexican territory if the US entered the war against Germany and Mexico then went to war with the US. The British decoded the telegram and it was published in March 1917.

# Wilson's War Message

- Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war in April 1917.
- His speech wasn't confined to protests against violations of American's rights as a neutral power.
- He portrayed the war as an ideological struggle between democracy and autocracy. "The world must be made safe for democracy."